

*THE CAMP SITE BENEATH THE
CRAVENS HOUSE PORCH*

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological investigations beneath the porch of the Cravens house on the Lookout Mountain battlefield revealed the presence of a camp site apparently occupied by newspaper writers and artists. The camp site and its contents are described.

Introduction

During the early Fall months of 1863 a small group of northern newspaper reporters and artists calling themselves the "Bohemian Club" endured the Confederate siege of Chattanooga. After the siege was lifted in late November, 1863, the members of the Bohemian Club moved to a new camp on the recently contested Lookout Mountain battlefield. There they bivouaced near the Cravens House while they immortalized and romanticized the "Battle Above the Clouds" (Shanks 1866: 1-15).

The Bohemian Club camp was known as "Camp Harper's Weekly." Harper's writer William Shanks described its rigors.

When the battle was over, the pursuit of the rebels ended, and the army happily in undisputed possession, the pilgrimage to the mountain began; and daily, for months after the victory, whole brigades of the Army of the Cumberland visited the scene of the exploits of their comrades from the Potomac and the Tennessee. The "Bohemian Club," which had barely managed to exist through the long and tedious siege of Chattanooga, glad of newfound liberty, reinforced themselves with a photographer, and established themselves in "Camp Harper's Weekly," which they located on the eastern slope of the mountain near the base of the "palisades," and just above the "White House." Here they painted and photographed, sketched and scribbled, until in the course of time all that was prominent, or picturesque, or interesting, on or of the mountain and the battle, was preserved on canvas or in note-book. Camp Harper's Weekly life, for the three months which the Club endured it, was hardly less horrible than that which they were forced to undergo in Chattanooga. The sweets of liberty, of which in their forced captivity they had formed such vivid impressions, were found to be not so decidedly enjoyable as they had imagined. There

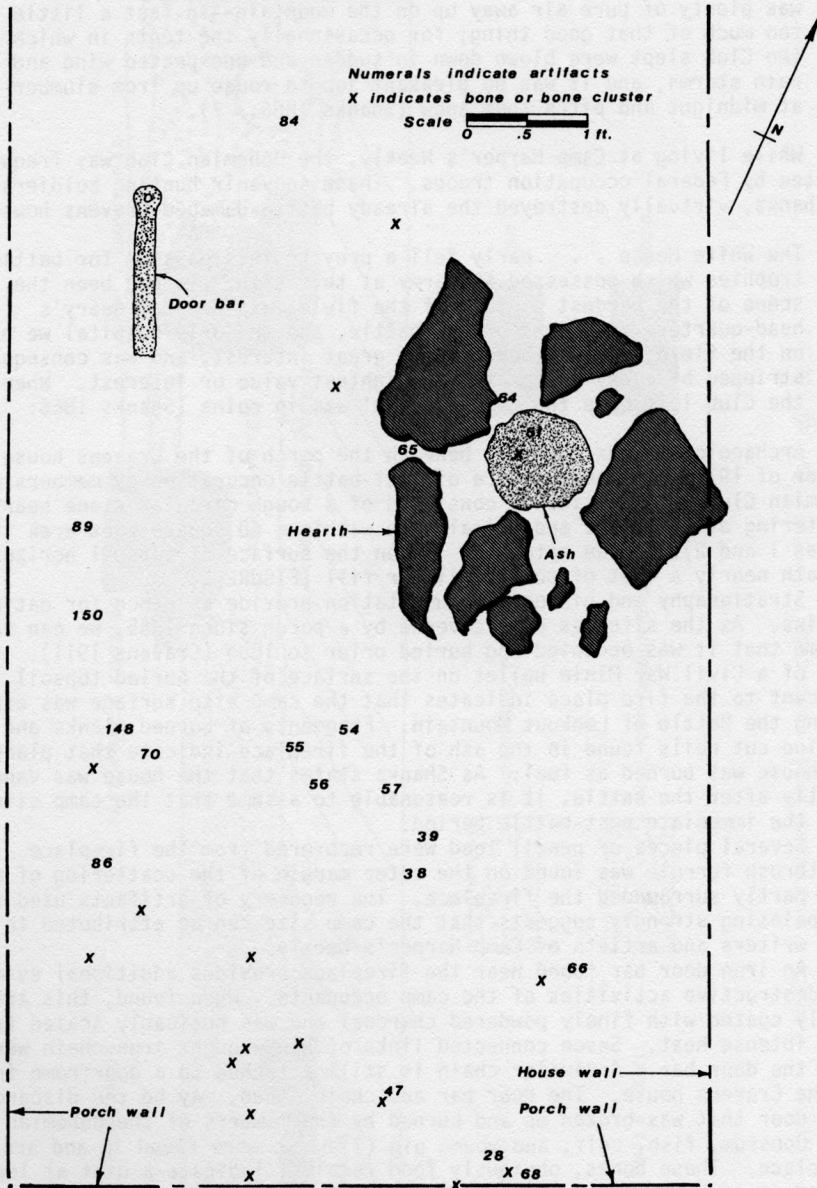


FIGURE 1. Cravens House camp site plan. The inside margins of the porch and house walls are indicated.

was plenty of pure air away up on the mountain--in fact a little too much of that good thing; for occasionally the tents in which the Club slept were blown down in sudden and unexpected wind and rain storms, and it was no pleasant job to rouse up from slumber at midnight and pitch them anew (Shanks 1866: 7).

While living at Camp Harper's Weekly, the Bohemian Club was frequently visited by Federal occupation troops. These souvenir hunting soldiers, according to Shanks, virtually destroyed the already battle-damaged Cravens house.

The White House . . . early fell a prey to this passion for battle trophies which possessed the army at this time. It had been the scene of the hardest contest of the field, was General Geary's head-quarters the night of the battle, and the only hospital we had on the field; it was therefore of great interest, and was consequently stripped of every thing of the slightest value or interest. When the Club left camp the 'White House' was in ruins (Shanks 1866: 3).

Archaeological excavations beneath the porch of the Cravens house in the summer of 1975 revealed evidence of post-battle occupation by members of the Bohemian Club. This evidence consisted of a rough circular stone hearth and a scattering of artifacts and animal bone within a 60 square foot area (FIGURE 1, Tables 1 and 2). These materials lay on the surface of topsoil horizon buried beneath nearly a foot of post-Civil War fill (FIGURE 2).

Stratigraphy and historic documentation provide evidence for dating the remains. As the site has been covered by a porch since 1866, we can safely assume that it was occupied and buried prior to 1866 (Cravens 1911). The presence of a Civil War Minie bullet on the surface of the buried topsoil level adjacent to the fire place indicates that the camp site surface was exposed during the Battle of Lookout Mountain. Fragments of burned planks and 103 machine cut nails found in the ash of the fireplace indicate that planking from the house was burned as fuel. As Shanks states that the house was vandalized shortly after the battle, it is reasonable to assume that the camp site dates from the immediate post-battle period.

Several pieces of pencil lead were recovered from the fireplace. An artist's paintbrush ferrule was found on the outer margin of the scattering of animal bone that partly surrounded the fireplace. The recovery of artifacts used for writing and painting strongly suggests that the camp site can be attributed to the Bohemian Club writers and artists of Camp Harper's Weekly.

An iron door bar found near the fireplace provides additional evidence of the destructive activities of the camp occupants. When found, this artifact was partly coated with finely powdered charcoal and was noticeably scaled from contact with intense heat. Seven connected links of handwrought iron chain were located near the door bar. A similar chain is still attached to a doorframe in the cellar of the Cravens house. The door bar and chain, then, may be the discarded remains of a door that was broken up and burned by the members of the Bohemian Club.

Opossum, fish, calf, and young pig (?) bones were found in and around the fireplace. These bones, obviously food remains, indicate a diet at least partially dependent on hunting and fishing. The highly deteriorated, yet uncharred, condition of most of these bones suggests that they may have been boiled. The shape of the ash heap within the fireplace provides an additional clue to the method of

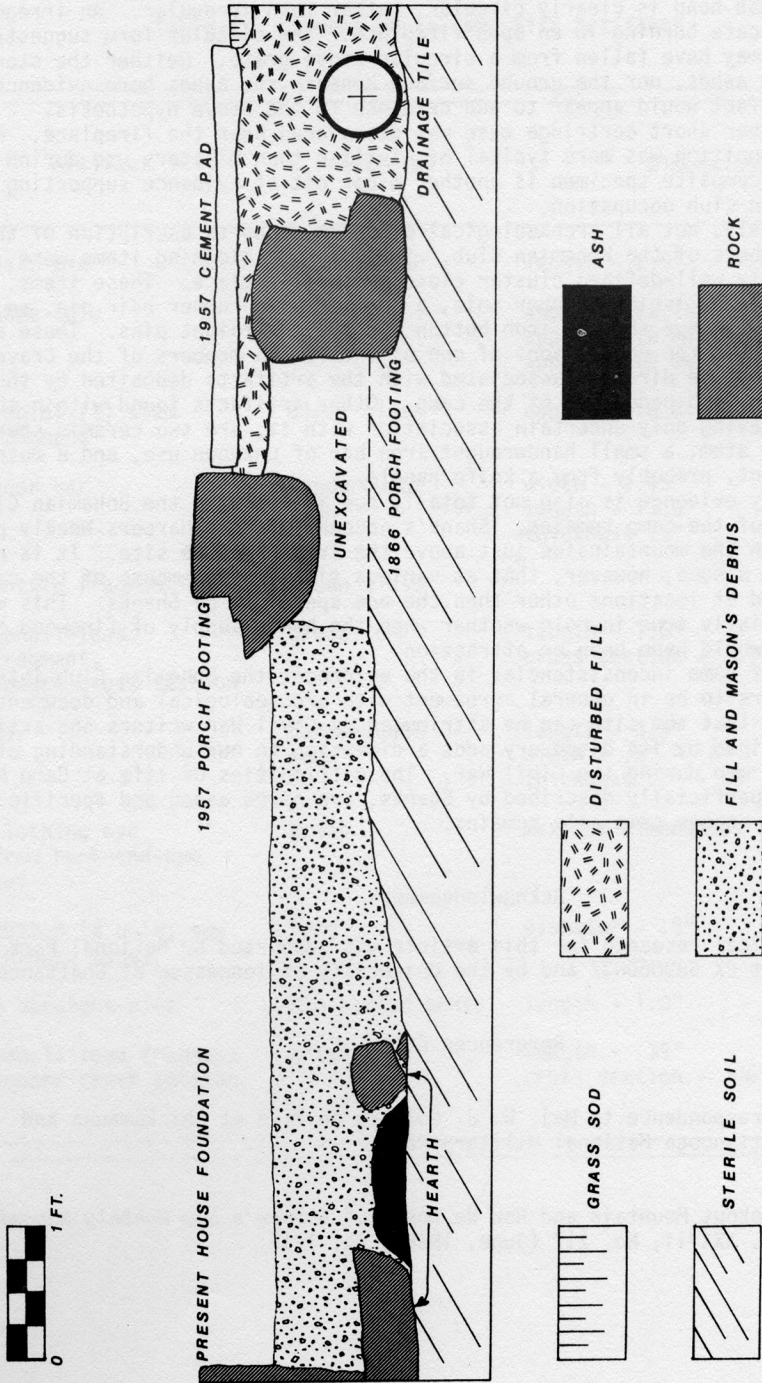


FIGURE 2. Cravens House camp site. Profile facing south.

cooking. The ash heap is clearly circular, rather than irregular. An irregular form would indicate burning in an open fireplace. The circular form suggests that the ashes may have fallen from a circular stove grate. Neither the stones surrounding the ashes, nor the ground surface beneath the ashes bore evidence of heating. This fact would appear to add credence to the stove hypothesis.

A .22 caliber short cartridge case was discovered near the fireplace. As .22 caliber ammunition was more typical of civilian than military use during the Civil War, the campsite specimen is another minor bit of evidence supporting the idea of Bohemian Club occupation.

Unfortunately, not all archaeological evidence supports ascription of the campsite to members of the Bohemian Club. Seven female clothing items were found in a fairly well-defined cluster close to the fireplace. These items include a leather ballerina slipper sole, a portion of a rubber hair pin, an eye from a hook-and-eye set, an iron button and three straight pins. These artifacts may have been the possessions of one of the female members of the Cravens family and may not be directly associated with the artifacts deposited by the assumed Bohemian Club occupants of the camp. Other artifacts found within the camp site but having only uncertain association with it, are two ceramic sherds, a broken goblet stem, a small handwrought iron bar of unknown use, and a mother-of-pearl fragment, probably from a knife handle.

Documentary evidence is also not totally consistent with the Bohemian Club interpretation of the camp remains. Shank's account of Camp Harpers Weekly places the camp site on the mountainside just above the Cravens house site. It is not unreasonable to assume, however, that at various times some members of the camp might have lived at locations other than the one specified by Shanks. This would have been especially true in cold weather when the handy supply of firewood at the house site would have been an attraction.

In spite of some inconsistencies in the evidence, the Bohemian Club interpretation appears to be in general agreement with archaeological and documentary data. Assuming that the site can be attributed to Civil War writers and artists, the evidence gained by its discovery adds a dimension to our understanding of the life of "media" men during the Civil War. The difficulties of life at Camp Harpers Weekly, superficially described by Shanks, are given added and specific emphasis by the meager camp site remains.

Acknowledgements

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References Cited

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Table 1. Cravens House Camp Site Artifacts

| No. | Artifact | Material | Dimensions |
|-----|--|------------------|---|
| 28 | hair pin | hard rubber | length - 2.9" |
| 38 | shoe sole | leather | approximate length - 7.6" approximate minimum width - 2" approximate maximum width - 2.4" |
| 39 | goblet (?) stem fragment | clear glass | approximate diameter - .75" |
| 46 | door bar | handwrought iron | width - 1.45" length - 13.9" thickness .5" |
| 47 | bottle fragment | green glass | |
| 51 | pencil lead fragment, square cross section | graphite | length - 1.5" cross section - .6" x .6" |
| 54 | bar | handwrought iron | length - 3.9" width - .5" - .6" thickness .2" - .3" |
| 55 | clothing eye from hook-and-eye set | brass | maximum dimensions - .3" x .3" |
| 56 | button (4 hole, sew through type) | iron | diameter - .5" |
| 57 | 2 straight pins | tin-plated brass | length - 1.0" |
| 64 | pencil lead fragment, square cross section | graphite | length - .35" cross section - .06" x .06" |

Table 1. (continued)

| No. | Artifact | Material | Dimensions |
|-----|--|---------------------|---|
| 65 | pencil lead fragment, square cross section | graphite | length = 1.0" cross section - .06" x .06" |
| 66 | knife (?) handle fragment | mother-of-pearl | |
| 68 | paint brush ferrule | iron | length - 1.0" diameter of shaft aperture - .25" width of bristle aperture - .45" height of bristle aperture - .10" |
| 70 | straight pin | tin-plated brass | length - 1.0" |
| 87 | 7 connected chain links | handwrought iron | minimum length - 1.8" maximum length - 2.6" approximate diameter - .25" |
| 86 | Minie bullet (unfired) | lead | .572 (measured) caliber |
| 89 | sherd, white-glazed, white earthen-ware, green and red hand- painted design | ceramic | |
| 148 | .22 caliber cartridge case, rimfire, no headstamp | copper | .22 caliber, short |
| 150 | sherd, matches #89 | ceramic | |

Table 2. Cravens House Camp Site Identifiable Bone

| Animal | Bone | Quantity |
|---------------|------------------------------------|----------|
| opossum | vertebrae | 5 |
| opossum | ulna | 1 |
| opossum | radius | 1 |
| opossum | scapula | 1 |
| fish | vertebrae | 4 |
| fish | ribs | 5 |
| probable calf | thoracic vertebra, dorsal spine | 1 |
| probable calf | mandible fragment | 1 |
| probable calf | lumbar vertebra | 1 |
| probable calf | phalange | 1 |
| small pig (?) | mandible fragment | 1 |

* Bone identification by Paul W. Parmalee, Department of Anthropology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

